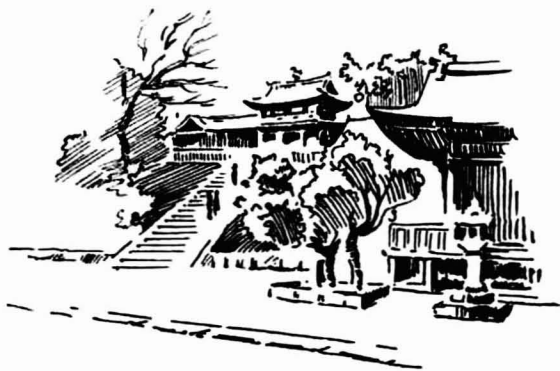


JAPAN'S NATIONAL HOLIDAYS



By DIETRICH SECKEL

All nations have holidays. But these are by no means the same the world over. Some nations put the emphasis on the religious, others on the political aspect, and others again on amusement. The stronger the peculiarity of a national character, the greater the difference between its state holidays and those of other nations. Familiarity with a nation's holidays contributes to the understanding of the nation itself.

The nation which represents the greatest psychological riddle of the present time is Japan. Most people's ideas about her have been proved wrong during the last few months. Hence the question: what are the Japanese really like? The answer to this cannot be given in one article or one book. However, we believe that the following pages are a contribution to it.

Dr. Dietrich Seckel is a young German scholar living in Japan. The son of a professor of the University of Berlin, he studied at the same university. In 1936 Dr. Seckel became instructor at the Hiroshima Kotogakko and in 1939 at the Urawa Kotogakko and the Imperial University of Tokyo. All his time which is not given to teaching is devoted to research of his own, mainly in the field of Japanese art.
—K.M.

THE ideals and values forming the basis of national life are revealed in the objects and events of the people's most important celebrations. If we want to grasp the inner motive power of a nation taking an active part on the political stage we must look beyond the geographical, political, military, and economic sphere to see what lies behind it all and finds expression in these spheres.

In Germany it is the ideas of nation, Reich, Führer, national work, and heroism which are made the objects of the national holidays. In Japan the underlying ideas are similar, yet in a different, very peculiar way such as is found in no other nation in the world. That is why the Japanese so often say, when the similarity between theirs and the German fundamental attitude is stressed: "Superficially it may seem so, but essentially we are different—indeed, incomparable and unique." The example of Japanese official national holidays may show that this proud conviction is not entirely

unjustified if it issues from a genuine depth of feeling and not from propagandistic chauvinism.

EVERYBODY'S BIRTHDAY

Two of the four major Japanese national holidays fall right at the beginning of the year: the New Year festival and the day commemorating the founding of the Empire, February 11. Both are closely connected in their significance. Empire Founding Day (*Kigen-setsu*, 紀元節) commemorates the day on which 2,602 years ago—660 B.C.—the first Emperor, Jimmu, is supposed to have ascended the throne and laid the foundations of the Empire. At the spot south of Nara, in the heart of Japan, where his palace probably stood and where his grave-mound lies in the midst of a forest, there now stands a great Shinto Shrine, Kashiwara-Jingu (宮神原橿), visited by countless reverent pilgrims, one of the most important national sanctuaries of Japan. The building is quite new, but erected in.

the old traditional style of Shinto architecture. As is so often the case in Japan, here, too, the new is at the same time ancient, for it is eternal and has been handed down in unbroken tradition.

As the Emperor Jimmu is, for the Japanese, a direct descendant in the fifth generation of the sun goddess, the founding of the Empire—carried out at the order of the goddess—is closely bound up with her, the ancestress of the Imperial House and thus the real national deity. And so the New Year festival has for the Japanese a very deep significance for the national cult, in contrast to Europe where it is simply the beginning of a new year and has lost all original religious meaning.

The special place taken by the New Year festival is also expressed by the fact that it is regarded as the birthday of every Japanese. Each one of them becomes a year older on January 1. The actual birthday is of very minor importance, so much so that, except in the case of children, hardly any notice is taken of it, sometimes not even in the most intimate family circles. This may, of course, be also partly accounted for by the lesser importance of the individual personality.

IMPERIAL CEREMONIES

The New Year holidays, which take up a whole week, were until most recent times the only ones which were real holidays in the sense that all work stopped. To some extent, especially in the traditional occupations, this is still the case today. The Sunday is, after all, a very modern and by no means generally accepted idea. From time immemorial the Japanese have celebrated the New Year with the greatest enthusiasm and prolonged festivals characterized by innumerable strange customs. Today, in war time, all this has been considerably curtailed. But it would be nice to see the old holiday customs revived in happier days in all their colorful vitality; with the innate pleasure the Japanese people take in festivals this may be expected more or less with certainty.

The official ceremony of January 1 is called *Shihohai* (四方拜) in Japanese,

which means "worship of the four points of the compass." It is performed in the early hours of the morning by the Emperor himself in his capacity of high priest of the national cult in the sanctuary of the Imperial Palace. By worshipping the four cardinal points he links up the Empire with the great forces ruling the universe and in this way prays for the prosperity of the Empire and the people.

A second New Year ceremony takes place on January 3, when the Emperor makes sacrifices in three sanctuaries within the Imperial Palace: in the *Kashikodokoro* (賢所), the "place of reverent awe," where a copy of the sacred Sun-Mirror is venerated; then in the *Koreiden* (皇靈殿), the sanctuary of the Imperial ancestors; and in the *Shinden* (神殿), the shrine of the gods. These rites are first mentioned in history as having taken place in 590, so that actually they are probably considerably older. Hence they too have a very old and unbroken tradition, as have so many other things in Japan.

EMPEROR-DEITY

The two other major national holidays are the birthday of the present Emperor on April 29 and the memorial day of Emperor Meiji, the founder of modern Japan, on November 3. This emperor, doubtless one of the greatest figures in all history, is venerated today more than ever as the sacred genius of the new Empire (as we might put it), to whom it owes everything. For according to the Japanese ideas even the greatest deeds of its subjects flow from the source of the sublime power and sacred virtue (*seitoku*, 聖徳) of the Emperor, who, as the descendant of the sun goddess, is regarded as a manifestation of the deity in human form (*arahito-gami*, 現人神). Thus this veneration of the Emperor is fundamentally different from anything of the kind we know in Europe. One of the reasons why the Emperor Meiji has so great a hold upon the hearts of the Japanese is that his Rescript on Education, delivered in 1890, forms the spiritual basis of the entire moral and national training of the people. "Rescript" is really too legal a word; it is actually a solemn ex-

hortation, filled with high ideals and couched in beautifully stylized language, to achieve the purest possible moral attitude and the greatest material accomplishments as well as to sacrifice oneself unreservedly for the Empire. Every Japanese knows the Rescript by heart, like every Christian the Lord's Prayer, for to him they are sacred words.

SCHOOLS CELEBRATE

How, then, is one of these great national holidays celebrated? Let us consider, for example, the schools. There a ceremony takes place which, by its simple dignity, leaves a deep impression on anyone who has once attended it. Teachers and pupils assemble, and the principal is greeted by all with a bow. Then the portraits of the Emperor and Empress hanging on the wall behind the dais are unveiled and honored by a deep, ceremonious bow of unusual length.

These pictures are the most precious treasures of every school, and many a teacher has risked his life to save them in a fire. Now the national anthem, "*Kimigayo*," is sung. It never fails to move us with its strange, austere power, its simplicity, its greatness, and yet its contemplative tenderness, especially when it issues from the throats of several hundred devout children.

After this the Imperial portraits are slowly veiled again, and the principal reads out the Rescript on Education of the Emperor Meiji and, lately, another Rescript of the present Emperor addressed to schoolchildren and students. He reads them from scrolls he has reverently taken out of their silk covers and recites the words, sometimes in a kind of liturgical chant, something like a Catholic priest reciting the sacred words of the mass. He may then add a short address; however, this is usually omitted. And the very fact that no attempt is made to hold a rousing patriotic speech of, after all, usually rather mediocre composition, renders such a ceremony—lasting at most ten minutes—all the more dignified and solemn. It is the portrait and the words

of the Emperor and the national anthem which permeate the entire ceremony and give it a depth of religious national feeling that goes far beyond either the purely national, ethical, or intellectual plane.

THE MINOR HOLIDAYS

Beside the four major national holidays there are a number of others. First comes the birthday of the Empress on March 6; then, on April 3, the commemoration of the death of the first Emperor Jimmu; and finally December 25, commemorating the death of the Emperor Taisho, the father of the present Emperor. That these two latter days are so important shows how the unbroken line of rulers of the Imperial House, that is to say, the real center of national existence reaching from primeval times down to the present day, appears in the national consciousness of the Japanese people as one identical unity. It is a further proof that even that which is most ancient is still a living part of the present and not something that has sunk into gray oblivion, never to return.

In connection with the idea of Emperor and Empire and with the worship of the deities, there are two other important days of great devotional significance for the nation: on the occasion of the Spring and Autumn Equinox, on March 23 and September 23, there are ceremonies at which the Emperor makes sacrifices to his ancestors, renders account to them, and prays for their blessing. For, according to Oriental conception, the ancestors with their omnipresent deified forces still influence our lives. It would lead too far to discuss here how much of these customs is common to all of Asia and how much is purely Japanese. At any rate, these two ceremonies—*Shunki-Koreisai* (春季皇霊祭), i.e., the Spring Ancestral Festival, and *Shuki-Koreisai* (秋季皇霊祭), i.e., the Autumn Ancestral Festival—again place the present Empire in a mysterious, blessed relationship with the ancestors through the sacred person of the Emperor in his capacity of priest.

THANKSGIVING DAYS

On the last two national holidays, which correspond more or less to the Harvest Festival or Thanksgiving Day of the West, the Emperor and people appear in reverent gratitude before the deities who reveal themselves in Nature. One of these holidays is the *Kannamesai* (神嘗祭) on October 17, when the gods are offered new rice and new rice wine (*sake*) in the supreme national sanctuary, the shrine of the sun goddess in Ise, as well as in the Imperial Palace. This rice is grown in fields somewhere in Japan which have been consecrated for this purpose in elaborate rites. It is the highest possible honor for a farmer to be allowed to grow the sacred rice. A similar ceremony takes place on the occasion of the second harvest festival, the *Niinamesai* (新嘗祭) on November 23, when the Emperor offers up the new harvest to his ancestors and partakes of it himself.

All these festivals take place in the impenetrable seclusion of the palace or of the shrine of the sun goddess as well as in other shrines, and not in the form of a gay public holiday for the masses, as in the West. This does not mean that their significance for the people is any less important; but it is characteristic of the nation that the keynote of the Japanese national holidays is their solemn quietness.

MORE MYTHICAL THAN POLITICAL

There are many other respects in which the Japanese national festivals differ from the Western. What strikes one most is the lack of days commemorating great historical events; at any rate they are not kept as official national holidays. Even the founding of the Empire is, after all, considered in Japan as an event of a mythical, quasi-religious rather than a historical or political nature. Everything is centered in the Imperial House and its ancestors (among whom are counted the deities), so that all holidays are rites of the national cult, but not religious feasts in the sense of the Buddhist festivals in Asia or the Christian ones

in Europe. Nor do they have a purely political or historical character. For all political and historical events, in the ordinary sense of the words—however decisive they may be—are considered secondary to that in which they all have their sources: the innate sacred power of the Emperor and the deities.

It is in this plunging into more profound depths that a great part of Japan's belief in her special mission is founded. The Japanese do not consider themselves as one nation among many, living in a common political and historical sphere, but as *the* nation, deeper and more all-embracing than any other nation, whose political and historical reality and achievements derive from an entirely different sphere that reaches beyond the purely national or political into the divine cosmos. It is this sphere that is personified by the Emperor, and through his innate divine power it is to radiate over the whole world and unite the peoples "under one roof" (*hakko ichi-u*, 八紘一宇).

Hence it is not the day of the Meiji Restoration of 1868, a political event of the utmost importance, but the Emperor Meiji who is commemorated. And he is not honored simply as a historical hero, as a "personality" or "genius" in our secular and human sense, but as a mythical figure, as the revelation of the divine powers that have ruled Japan since the beginning of time and whose representative descendant is always the ruling Emperor. His person changes, but the divine visibly apparent in him remains always the same, the unchanging in all change. This is what is worshiped as the mysterious and at the same time manifest center of the Empire and people, from which all life and all great deeds issue. And this is also the profound meaning of the national holidays.

DEIFIED WARRIORS

But let us not forget the day which, during the last few years, has usually been celebrated twice a year. Although it is not one of the official national holidays, it ranks with them: the Heroes'

Memorial Day, as it might be called. However, in Japan, it does not only mean a devout and grateful "remembrance" but something spiritually much deeper. The soldier who has given his life with unusual heroism for the Emperor—the Japanese do not say "for his country" but "for the Emperor"—has now become *kami* (神), a divine being entitled to veneration by family and nation (in Japanese, *gun-shin*, 軍神, "deified warrior"). These divine spirits are received in a solemn ceremony into the sanctuary of the war dead, the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Then the Emperor himself proceeds to the Shrine and honors the new *kami* by prayer and sacrifice, while the many thousands of relatives, invited from all parts of the Empire, remain deeply moved in a silent bow.

This is not homage paid by one human to another or by the representative of the nation to the fallen compatriots as in the West, such as when a king honors the war dead. Rather does the Emperor as the incarnate deity look up in awe to the spirits of the fallen, who before, not only as his subjects but as ordinary human beings, stood far below him. And to be raised by the sacrifice of his life to the state of *kami*, to whom the divine Emperor himself pays homage, is the highest pinnacle which can be reached by a mortal Japanese. This is one of the deeper spiritual reasons for the unparalleled heroism of the Japanese

soldier which cannot be explained solely with the idea of *bushido*.

THE EIGHTH OF THE MONTH

Since the outbreak of the Pacific war there is a new day of commemoration which is marked only by a very simple, short ceremony before the normal day's work begins, and on which the people refrain from all amusements: the eighth of every month, the day when war was declared last December. And here, too, the Japanese do not remember the actual historical event of this declaration of war but the granting of an Imperial Rescript to the nation and the world, that is, the almost religious proclamation of sacred words which show the way for the struggle and which give the strength to endure.

The ceremonies which unite the whole nation on this day culminate in the reading of this Rescript. And when during these ceremonies throughout Japan and overseas, wherever Japanese are living, in every school, factory, and office, the gathering turns toward the Imperial palace in Tokyo to pay homage to the Emperor by a silent bow from afar, and when after that, the "*Kimigayo*" rings out, striking the listener's heart—then even the foreigner feels the uniting faith, the divine breath and lifestream which in moments like this pulsate through the entire nation as through a single body, giving it strength, energy, and inspiration for all its deeds and all its heavy duties.

